



Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach

Terje Østebø & Kjetil Tronvoll

To cite this article: Terje Østebø & Kjetil Tronvoll (2020): Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach, Journal of Eastern African Studies, DOI: [10.1080/17531055.2020.1796255](https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1796255)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17531055.2020.1796255>



Published online: 23 Jul 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



SHOUT
SHARE **IT**



Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach

Terje Østebø^a and Kjetil Tronvoll^b

^aUniversity of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA; ^bBjorknes University College, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

Decades of both non-violent and armed struggle did not bring much result to the Oromo quest for political power over the Ethiopian state, and contemporary Oromo politics often appear recondite and discordant. When Abiy Ahmed came to power as the new Prime Minister in April 2018 as the first Oromo politician entering the former imperial palace, many believed it was the Oromo's turn to rule. Developments since then have, however, revealed a far more complex picture, where previous internal divisions have resurfaced, and where the inherently fragmented nature of Oromo politics seems to have prevailed. Drawing on recent interviews, in this article, we argue that the current divisions and positions in Oromo politics may be made explicable by applying a multilayered ethnographic approach to identify their provenance and grassroots anchoring. With the three main positions found within Oromo politics – the unitarist, secessionist, and federalist – as our point of departure, we unveil the deeper connections between the current political positioning and their historical trajectories and ethnographic anchoring, and we capture overlooked and competing power discourses informing Oromo politics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 June 2020

Accepted 13 July 2020

KEYWORDS

Ethiopia; Oromo; politics; ethnicity; political anthropology; federalism; ethno-nationalism

Ethiopia's contemporary Oromo politics and its organizational features often appear recondite and discordant. Many find it inexplicable that Ethiopia's largest ethnic demographic community has not made a greater imprint – as Oromo – on the national politico-culture and the administration of the country. Moreover, some would claim that the Oromo political elite has not even managed to assume full authority over its own regional affairs, but has been – and still is – exploited by other ethnic elites pursuing a “non-Oromo agenda.”

The coming to power of Abiy Ahmed as Prime Minister in April 2018 was the first time an individual representing an Oromo political front assumed the position as Ethiopia's prime minister. Finally, many believed, it was the Oromo's turn to rule and Oromo rights and political aspirations should be heeded. Developments since then have, however, revealed a far more complex picture, where previous internal divisions have resurfaced, old alliances and allegiances have been remade, and where the inherently fragmented nature of Oromo politics seems to have prevailed.

In this article, we argue that the current divisions and positions in Oromo politics may be made explicable by applying a multilayered ethnographic approach to identify their provenance and grassroots anchoring. Our aim is to unveil the deeper connections between the current political positioning and their historical trajectories and ethnographic context, seeking to capture the diversity of real-life experiences and expose overlooked and competing power discourses informing Oromo politics.

While a number of scholars have tried to analyze Oromo political discourse,¹ we believe Oromo politics can – somewhat simplified – be divided into three main positions or discourses. The first can be characterized as *unitarist*; favoring integration in the Ethiopian state, toning down any ethno-nationalist fervor, and, to a certain extent, seeking assimilation into a (Amharized) national culture. This is arguably the oldest expression of Oromo politics, dating back to the seventeenth century when the Oromo of Shoa were part of the state-building elite. Brian Yates has in a new study clearly demonstrated that the Oromo were far more integrated in the political elite than previously assumed.² The second position is the *secessionist*, emerging in the 1970s and historically represented by the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF). This argument has fervently contested the nature of the Ethiopian state, arguing that Menelik's campaigns in the late nineteenth century was nothing less than internal colonization and subjugation and that the only solution for the Oromo to genuinely be represented in politics as Oromo was to secede from Ethiopia and create a separate state.

The third and newest position can be labeled the *federalist*, surfacing in the 1990s, partly as a consequence of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front's (EPRDF) implementation of multinational federalism. Represented by parties such as the Oromo National Congress (ONC), the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM), the Oromo Democratic Front (ODF), and the newly established Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), this position has advocated for numerical representation of Oromos at the federal level and genuine self-rule within Oromia. In contrast to the secessionist, it has argued that the Oromo have always been at the core of the Ethiopian empire, albeit cloaked as Amharized representatives, and have never been allowed either to appear as Oromo or gain equal representation. Hence, they seek to remain within the Ethiopian political framework, arguing that the solution for the Oromo is to implement what it sees as *real* federalism within a democratic state; consequently the Oromo, as the biggest ethnic group, would be guaranteed representation at the center and presumably dominance in government, as well as control of their own affairs.

It is important to underscore that the strength, relevance, and even meaning of these positions have varied over time. It is interesting to note over the last few years how the *federalist* position has come to dominate the Oromo political discourse, pulling both the “unitarists” and “secessionists” towards supporting different varieties of federalism as the principle of governance in Ethiopia. This does not mean, however, that the unitarist and secessionist positions have become irrelevant, as seen by the discourse during the eruption of violence after the killing of the popular Oromo artist Haacaaluu Hundeessaa in early July 2020, where these opposing trends are clearly clashing. Future internal Oromo dynamics and the trajectory of Ethiopian politics more broadly will be crucial factors determining how the discourse will develop.

The paper is based on decades of research on Ethiopian and Oromo political developments, as well as updated empirical material collected during multiple field trips since the political changes of 2018 through interviews with key political actors and observers in Addis Ababa, concluding with a fieldtrip in February–March 2020, where we conducted additional interviews with people on the ground in areas including Bale, Hararghe, West Shoa and Addis Ababa.³

The first section discusses the politico-historical framing of Oromo politics, including reassessing some hypothesis posed in Donald Levine's seminal, but controversial, volume *Greater Ethiopia* and views from different Oromo scholars. Thereafter follows a short historical overview of the Oromo struggle, before we delve into current the Oromo political landscape, exploring the party organizational structures of Oromo politics and their key leaders. Subsequently, we analyze Oromo politics based on sub-region/clan, religious, and generational divisions; to reach a conclusion on how the three main Oromo political discourses resonate with which population base.

Ethnographic framing of the political discourse

Decades of both non-violent and armed struggle did not bring much of a result to the Oromo quest for political power over the Ethiopian state. Compared with movements like the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), the Oromo movement has been far less successful. Common explanations for this have been the homogenous nature of the population in the north and the rigid command structures of the fronts in Tigray and Eritrea, which resonated with traditional socio-cultural hierarchies.⁴ The ostensibly substantial potential of the OLF to mobilize the largest population group in the Horn of Africa to a cause which was perceived as just and legitimate by the vast majority, never materialized. Leenco Lata, one of the founding members of the Front, went as far as to say that the OLF was the biggest failure in the history of resistance movements. Arguing that the majority of the Oromo supported their cause, he lamented how the OLF never managed to organize the struggle in such a way that capitalized on this potential.⁵

As part of trying to understand the Oromo's lack of political success, it would be interesting to go back to Donald Levine's seminal work on Ethiopia's political culture to see if his hypothesizes may still be used to shed light on current political dynamics. One should be careful, however, of adopting old theoretical frames written decades ago and uncritically project them on current affairs; hence we approach Levine's work with care. However, observers of Ethiopian society are struck by how politico-cultural continuities remain relevant to how politics are played out. This is true also today after the reforms initiated by the change of power within the ruling EPRDF coalition in 2018 and the establishment of the Prosperity Party (PP) as the new government party.

One of Levine's key arguments for the Oromo's inability to claim political power is that the Oromo are organized along a horizontal dimension, as opposed to the hierarchical structures of the highland core groups of Amhara and Tigray:

Among Amhara controls are structured through a finely graded hierarchy of statuses in which those in superordinate positions are entitled to unquestioning deference and public compliance. In Oromo society, controls are exerted by authority figures who are constantly kept in check by formal and informal processes which reflect a distrust of hierarchy and a concern for the expression of group consensus.⁶

We believe that this is too simplified and that we need to move beyond such largely primordialist perspectives. However, while Levine's dichotomy remains too essentialized, he is one of the few who has recognized the inherent diversity among the Oromo as a relevant factor influencing their overall coherence:

[...]they had adopted radically different cultures: some were now Christians, some Muslims, and others remained pagan; some were now plow cultivators, and others remained nomadic pastoralists. They had divided into numerous tribes which were as likely to fight one another as to fight other ethnic groups. This precluded concerted defense of a pan-[Oromo] basis.⁷

Oromo scholars have, on the other hand, generally underscored homogeneity and unity as a primordial quality among the Oromo, invoking the term *Oromummaa* (Oromoness),⁸ and seeing internal divisions as “essentially diversionary and even irrelevant.”⁹ Others, like Asafa Jalata, have recognized the fragmentation of the Oromo movement, yet argue that this was a result of Menelik’s conquest and internal colonization, causing the Oromo, among others, to borrow foreign religions like Christianity and Islam. *Oromummaa* then becomes a project – as well as the foundation – for the production of a unitary movement and to “interlink Oromo personal, interpersonal and collective (national) relationships, and assists in the development of Oromo-centric political strategies and tactics that can mobilize the nation for collective action empowering the people for liberation”.¹⁰

Whereas we understand the need for ethno-nationalists to remove “distortions” and create a unitary narrative, a nuanced and more accurate understanding of current Oromo politics depends on rigid and critical analyses of the peculiar geo-ethnographic context of the Oromo. As such we echo Serawit Bekele’s understanding, who with reference to the Irrecha ceremonies, argues that a simplified ethno-nationalist discourse “pre-supposes a singularity of meaning and thereby reproduces the hegemony it sets out to challenge” – consequently “creating its own ‘subalterns.’”¹¹

Applying the concept of *peoplehood*,¹² a concept that allows for flexibility, we approach ethnic identities as being of a segmentary nature, ranging “from the family, the lineage, and the clan to the nation or the race.”¹³ Our argument is that pan-Oromo unity has always existed in tensions with inherent internal divisions, and that the salience of this is crucial for why the Oromo have remained vulnerable for fragmentation, outside interference, and inhibited from creating a firm pan-Oromo socio-political cohesion. The vast geographical, socio-cultural, and religious terrain inhabited by the Oromo today, is in itself an impediment to creating a unified and robust supra-political front comprising and containing all sub-divisions and differing political positions and aspirations. To interpret and analyze such a diverse terrain, one needs to capture multi-layered sentiments and ethnography which influence and inform political trajectories and support for the three different streams.¹⁴ While they remain important in explaining the discursive nature of Oromo politics, we argue that a contextual approach drawing on political ethnography reveals a far more complex picture where religious, regional, and socio-cultural dynamics have produced deep divisions and seemingly inherent fragmentations. We believe that a thorough understanding of this is imperative in order to fully comprehend current Oromo politics.

The Oromo struggle: a short historical overview

The contemporary Oromo struggle for political representation at the center reflects its history of incorporation under the Ethiopian Crown. Large parts of today’s Oromia were, together with other areas, integrated into the Ethiopian empire during Menelik’s conquests in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ This was largely an enforced process, and Menelik’s forces experienced significant resistance in particular in the area of Arsi (1881–86), later remembered as important antecedents for the Oromo struggle.¹⁶

The twentieth century saw continued Oromo resistance towards the state, which remained sporadic and locally confined. Significant was the Bale insurgency from 1963 to 1970, when Arsi Oromo pastoralists took up arms against the Imperial Government. This insurgency was also largely locally confined, yet indirectly connected to a broader movement of resistance in the larger southeastern Ethiopia. Also important was how Islam played a reinforcing role in these areas.¹⁷

The establishment of the Macha Tulama Welfare Association (MTWA) in 1963 represented the first attempts to create a pan-Oromo movement. The association was formed by Macha and Tulama Oromo hailing from Wollega and Shoa, who belonged to the capital's urban elite. They were all Orthodox Christians, yet saw early the need to expand the movement among the Muslim Oromo, particularly in Arsi, thus establishing links with the insurgents in Bale. While MTWA initially was focused on developing social projects among the Oromo, it soon became politicized, advocating for the political rights of the Oromo. This was the reason why it was banned in 1967.¹⁸

A new chapter in the Oromo struggle commenced in 1973–4 with the formation of the OLF. The front started its military operations in 1974 in the Chercher mountains in Hararge. From the early 1980s, it extended its activities to the western area of Wollega, where it also grew significantly in strength. The main leadership remained largely in exile, first in Mogadishu and later in Khartoum. Another alternative movement – the Somali Abbo Liberation Front (SALF) – emerged around the same time, and while it was closely connected to the Somali government, it was dominated by Arsi Oromo from Bale. The OLF was critical to the “Somali Abbo” name and viewed the SALF as a tool for Somali irredentism. The SALF was effectively crushed by the Ethiopian army in the course of the Ogaden War (1977–78), while the OLF continued its sporadic military operations in western Ethiopia. In the mid-1980s, another organization called the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) emerged in Hararge. This again points to the relevance of religious divides within Oromo politics. IFLO still exists, but has never managed to make much imprint on Oromo politics.

The Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), established by TPLF in 1988 and which later became one of the four coalition partners in the EPRDF, emerged as the TPLF-sanctioned “alternative” to OLF. However, it never gained much support among the Oromo and was never viewed as a legitimate representative Oromo party.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the emphasis on ethnicity as the primary marker for political mobilization and organization, and the ratification of the new Ethiopian Constitution in 1995 which established Ethiopia as a multi-national federation, gave the OPDO some credit. Through its emphasis on Oromo language, culture, and identity, the party contributed – maybe somewhat unintentionally – to the formulation of Oromo ethno-nationalism which in turn became instrumental in formulating the EPRDF's version of an Oromo national identity.

During the immediate political transition after the fall of the Derg in 1991 and the subsequent establishment of the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE), the OLF agreed to end its armed struggle and joined the TGE. Their incorporation into the government ended abruptly in 1992, however, when disagreement over demobilization of OLF forces and contestations over local elections led the OLF to withdraw from the election and exit the TGE. The EPRDF immediately encircled and detained most of the encamped OLF army, but the forces and leadership which managed to escape detention returned to armed struggle. The EPRDF subsequently embarked on eradicating OLF elements within

Ethiopia, and severely weakened the organization. In the 2000s, the OLF leadership moved its headquarter to Asmara, but was in the years that followed haunted by internal schisms and subsequent defections and splits. One of its founding fathers and leading figure, Leenco Lata exited and brought with him some high-level members who subsequently formed their own party – the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) – to pursue a non-armed exile based opposition. In the region, OLF split into three fractions, the main one (OLF Shane) being led by Dawud Ibsa, and two minor fractions led by Galassa Dilbo and General Kemal, respectively.

The Oromo struggle took a new turn in 2014 with the start of widespread popular protests among the youth across the region. Spurred by the proposed new Addis Ababa and Surrounding Master-plan, but rooted in grievances over maladministration, corruption and human rights abuses, the protesters soon called for the overthrow of the government. The authorities' response to the protests was rather heavy-handed, resulting in an unknown number of casualties. As the protests continued unabated, the government answered by declaring two rounds of state of emergency – the first in October 2016 after the Irrecha incident,²⁰ and the second in February 2018. The latter was connected to Prime Minister Hailemariam Dessalegn's resignation, and demonstrated the government's inability to quell the protests.

Meanwhile, the duo later known as Team Lemma emerged consisting of that-time chairperson of OPDO and President of Oromia Lemma Megersa and his OPDO deputy Abiy Ahmed. The two soon started to criticize the government's handling of the protests, and Lemma Megersa vowed to "address the legitimate concerns of the youth."²¹ This soon earned them significant support among the Oromo protesters and activists, and Lemma Megersa's conciliatory statements vis-à-vis the Amhara further broadened their base. TPLF's position within EPRDF grew weaker as the Oromo and Amhara component parties pushed back against what they perceived as TPLF dominance within the coalition. In order to rise to the top and assume power over EPRDF in early 2018, after the sudden resignation of PM Hailemariam Dessalegn, the OPDO and the Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM) joined hands and together with representatives from the Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM) voted to elect Abiy Ahmed as the new chairperson of EPRDF and hence the prime minister of the federation.²² After coming to power, Abiy Ahmed's government invited all exile based opposition back to Ethiopia to join the political landscape. A separate peace agreement between the OLF and the Ethiopian Government was reached in August 2018, and facilitated the armed opposition to return to the country too.

While the political transition in 2018 was caused by EPRDF's internal power struggle and its inability to deal with the protests, the Qeerroo youth movement viewed itself as instrumental in bringing Abiy to power – hence claiming a stake in the government.²³ This, and Team Lemma's Oromo nationalist rhetoric created strong expectations among the Oromo, and the new Abiy-era was largely seen as "now it's our turn." Enthusiasm for Abiy Ahmed quickly spread beyond the Oromo constituency to the broader Ethiopian population, prompted by unprecedented political reforms, promises about democracy, release of political prisoners, the return of exiled political parties, and by the peace initiative with Eritrea. The first months of his tenure was thus characterized by a particular "Abiy-mania", where more or less everyone rallied behind him.²⁴ The "honeymoon" gradually ended, as we will explore below, and Abiy Ahmed's popularity

incrementally gave way to increased skepticism and outright opposition. His political philosophy, his leadership style, and the reconfiguration of the EPRDF coalition into the Prosperity Party drew much criticism from an increasingly crowded Oromo political landscape. The most symbolic expression of the re-surfacing of Oromo opposition to Abiy Ahmed's government was the re-launching of the armed struggle by Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) in late 2019, against what they perceived as a centralizing and suppressive federal government.²⁵

The current Oromo political landscape

While there are a number of registered parties in Oromia, there are rather few prominent ones with a chance to secure victory at constituency level. On the one side is the incumbent, which transformed itself from the OPDO, to the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP), before folding into the Prosperity Party in December 2019. Capitalizing on the surge of Oromoness and the “rebranding” of the OPDO, the Oromo faction with support of the Amhara was able to quash the TPLF's over-sized dominance of the government. The formation of the PP and the dissolution of the EPRDF led to the exit of TPLF from the government and to further centralization of power in the hands of Abiy Ahmed.

The new PP is underpinned by Abiy Ahmed's “philosophy” of *medemer* – a concept that is translated as “adding something or someone to something else” or as “synergy.” *Medemer* is said to be an Ethiopian political thought “that emanates from Ethiopia's social-political context and taps into the country's historical and cultural values.”²⁶ Particularly important is how *medemer* emphasizes national integration, inter-ethnic negotiations, peace and reconciliation, and cooperation between peoples across the country.²⁷ This has also become the most controversial part of *medemer* – underscoring Ethiopia as the main political entity and basis for collective identity and trying to mute ethnicity in politics. It claims to strike a balance between ethno-nationalism and civic nationalism by recognizing ethnic diversity, while, at the same time, underscoring that this is to be “developed through strong national unity.”²⁸

The rushed, top-down process of establishing PP and the *medemer* philosophy quickly drew criticism also from within the government's Oromo base, most clearly articulated by Abiy Ahmed's closest political adviser, Lemma Megersa. In an unprecedented public interview on VOA Lemma Megersa expressed: “It's not the time to come up with something new, but a time to solve problems that we should be focused on. We should focus on maintaining peace and stability and focus on macroeconomics, especially people's struggle with the rising cost of living.”²⁹ As a strong Oromo nationalist, Lemma Megersa allegedly early on raised internal criticism against Abiy Ahmed's pan-Ethiopian and unitary discourse as it undermined the federalist stand.³⁰

On the other side, the main Oromo opposition are the already discussed OLF, the Oromo Federal Congress (OFC), and the new and smaller Oromo National Party (ONP). The OFC is the result of a merger between the Oromo People's Congress (OPC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM). The party is led by Merera Gudina, with Bekele Gerba as the deputy chairperson. The social media activist Jawar Mohammed joined the party in late December 2019, causing the party to radically increase its voter appeal, attracting followers from across Oromia. Jawar Mohammed claims that he is just an ordinary member of the party, but it is clear that he is a key

actor in the party leadership.³¹ The rather small ONP was established by General Kemal Gelchu in April 2019. Defecting the Ethiopian army, he joined OLF in 2006, yet set up his own organization called OFL-For-Change in 2014 due to disagreement with the OLF leadership.³² He returned to Ethiopia in July 2018, and was soon appointed chief of the Oromia Security Administration Bureau by Abiy Ahmed. He was, however, removed from that position in April 2019.³³

Internal agreement among the Oromo opposition parties materialized through the “Coalition for Democratic Federalism” formed by OLF, OFC, and ONP in January 2020. The stated aims of the Coalition are to form a regional coalition government, to ensure free and fair elections, to coordinate material and financial resources during election campaigns, and to work together with other parties at national level.

Current Oromo politics is, unsurprisingly, all about identity. Hence, the PP’s emphasis on building a “strong government”³⁴ sits poorly among Oromo nationalists who for decades have fought against a strong central government in Ethiopia. The new centralizing procedures and policies of the PP thus created a great deal of anxiety and skepticism, and as such the general perception among our informants was that the PP is not an Oromo party, but rather a pan-Ethiopian party.³⁵

An even more important division is the view of the federal constitutional framework. All the opposition parties view themselves as defenders of multinational federalism, which largely means the realization of full ethnic autonomy as enshrined in the constitution, as opposed to PP’s perceived interest to mute ethnic sentiments and rights. Concomitantly, the *medemer* philosophy is seen as deviating from an Oromo nationalist discourse to a pan-Ethiopian one.³⁶ Some even claim that PP wants a return to a unitary state and hence by implication an Amharized national culture.

Oromo political discourse emphasizes the self-governance of Oromia, the making of Afan Oromo as a federal language, and control over the region’s resources; as explained by an Oromo elder: “It is all about Oromo first, and then Ethiopia. If we are able to govern and build Oromia, then we can build Ethiopia.”³⁷ A young student echoed this:

First, it is about identity. That Oromo should be respected, that Oromo should be the ones governing Oromia. And, that Oromo should be the federal language. Secondly, it is to free ourselves from having non-Oromo controlling Oromia; public positions, land, and wealth. Thirdly, it is that the Oromo should be governed by people they themselves elect.³⁸

It is such sentiments that the OLF leader Dawud Ibsa refers to when he admits that a party’s program and policies were not that important, as people would base their choice on identity and belonging to secure genuine Oromo representation at regional and federal level.³⁹

The main slogans used during rallies of the OFC – the most active campaigner from early 2020 – were that of *blisumma* (freedom) and *qabso Oromo* (the Oromo struggle). These are key terms that have followed the Oromo ethno-nationalist movement for decades, where *qabso Oromo* historically has referred to the Oromo struggle from serfdom and suppression during the Imperial Government, and where *blisumma* was understood as independent Oromia. Such past interpretations are still relevant today, as informants referred to the struggle as “against the northerners”, i.e. the Amhara who were said to have “grabbed Oromo land.”⁴⁰ This was related to the perception that Abiy Ahmed had turned to the Amhara agenda, betraying his Oromoness, and, moreover,

that the Oromia regional authorities were not true representatives of the people. With this as the preface, freedom revolved around the questions of protection from “foreign” interference, self-determination and self-control over the region’s resources. As one informant expressed it: “we want to move away from the dominance of the Amhara at least in our very own region.”⁴¹

The continued use of these concepts in such a new, yet somewhat vague manner, is a clear reminder of the salience of the past in Oromo politics. Although one talks about building a new future, this future is constantly mirrored in a history of Oromo suppression and suffering, and embedded in a distinct Oromo victimology. The Oromo struggle is thus, according to one informant, “to seek freedom from that past.”⁴² This may be one important factor why the current Oromo discourse still lacks a concrete political roadmap, but instead revolves around fundamental questions of identity.

While the opposition parties have their own separate identities, leadership, and organizational structures, they all claim to have the same objectives and program – all being the political representatives for the Oromo. According to Jawar Mohammed:

... there is really no ideological difference between Oromo political parties. Not even much of a strategic difference. It is just tactical difference. The Oromo question is very clear. The Oromo objective is very clear. It boils down to self-rule, which can be translated into cultural, political and economic autonomy, having full ownership over the wealth God has given us
...⁴³

The situation is arguably not that simple. While there might be shared objectives for the moment, it is obvious that they may fluctuate, affecting this presumed coherency. As noted earlier, political alliances in Ethiopia have always been tenuous and shifting,⁴⁴ and there are no reasons to believe that this will not again influence current and future Oromo politics.⁴⁵ The different Oromo parties’ policies are very general and vague, and this has in turn enhanced the relevance and prominence of individuals. Asafa Jalata laments this, arguing that the Oromo struggle has continuously been undermined by misguided individuals.⁴⁶ The lack of hierarchical structures among the Oromo, as Levine pointed to, has clearly opened up space for individual competition, but we further argue for the need to consider individual leaders’ orientation and questions of segmentary identities in relation to the broader Oromo socio-cultural landscape in order to fully understand current Oromo politics.

Traditional identity categories

Sub-regions in Oromia overlap to a large extent with traditional Oromo clan divisions. The Oromo are divided into two main moieties; the Borana and the Barentu, and groups such as the Borana, Macha, Tulama, and Guji sort under the former, while the Arsi, Karrayu, and other Oromo groups in Hararghe are found under the latter. Certain sub-groups, such as the Borana, Guji, and Arsi correspond to administrative zones in Oromia, although the Arsi are found in both Arsi and Bale zones. The Macha inhabit Wollega, Illubabor, Jimma, and parts of West Shoa, whereas the Tulama are found in the rest of Shoa. The Oromo are further sub-divided into clans (*gossa*), sub-clans (*balbala*), and the extended family (*warra*). While the word Oromo obviously existed, it was not uncommon – until the early 1980s – for the different branches to refer to themselves as Arsi, Tulama, etc., and not Oromo – or using more localized clan names.⁴⁷

While all these different branches share the same language, and to a large extent, the same cultural traits, disunity has arguably been the hallmark of the Oromo. Their distribution over a vast geographical area led to the development of several particular cultural and religious characteristics. Feuds and wars have also been common throughout history, driven by a distinct warrior culture among the Oromo, wherein war was something desirable, and where a man's honor was determined by how many persons or wild animals he had killed.⁴⁸ Fighting among branches and clans internally were also common, and inter-clan violence often had the form of vendettas – caused by various reasons – which tended to produce continuous fighting among clans. This was noted in the late nineteenth century by Martial de Salviac, who concluded that this lack of cohesion was one major reason for why Menelik defeated them.⁴⁹

While sub-regional divisions and parochial identities gradually have become less distinctive, this does not mean that they do not matter. Clans and sub-clans may have lost their relevance in many parts of Oromia, but are still relevant categories of identifications in certain areas. The Arsi Oromo, for instance, have a clear consciousness of their clans and sub-clans, where being an Arsi Oromo and clan affiliation still play a role when it comes to political preferences.

The relevance of sub-regional identities in politics is related to the different parties' and actors' origins and histories. The OLF, as the oldest Oromo party, had its early stronghold in Hararghe (Gara Mulata), while its first leaders hailed largely from Wollega and Shoa. Hence, the party's strongholds were traditionally in Hararghe and in the western parts of Oromia. As the main theater of operations during the 1980s was in Wollega, OLF has in particular sustained its popularity there. Furthermore, the OLF was for decades seen as the only legitimate political representative of the Oromo, which mean that "all" Oromo by default supported the party; and the OLF thus became the vehicle for the "Oromo mythos." This became particularly evident during the transition in 1991.

OLF's stronghold is still Wollega, and even if popular enthusiasm declined while the party was in exile, mainly due to internal fractures, many people still consider it "their" party: "There is a long history of OLF in Wollega, and people know the party."⁵⁰ In Hararghe, in contrast, popular support for OLF seems to have declined compared with the past. There, support was a generational issue and limited to the older generation, and it was argued that this was due to "old loyalties." The OLF has tried to win over the young generation in Hararghe, but as Jawar Mohammed joined the OFC, the youth appears to have gone to that party.⁵¹

The OLF appears to have limited support in Shoa, where local perceptions seem to be that the party has failed to keep up with current political developments. The OLA's armed incursion into West Shoa have complicated the political landscape there. While that area traditionally has been a stronghold for OFC, there were repeated reports of OLA fighters entering the towns in civilian clothes, sitting around in coffee-shops openly encouraging people to financially support the OLA or join the insurgency.⁵²

The OFC's and its predecessors' traditional stronghold have been West Shoa. This has also been the area where the party has actively campaigned during previous elections. Its predecessor, the ONC, managed to attract significant support across Oromia during the elections in 2005, when it ran as part of the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) coalition. OFC is the party that most significantly has transcended sub-regional divisions, and has in recent months managed to gain support in the rest of Shoa, Hararghe,

Arsi, and Bale. The main reason for this is the Jawar Mohammed effect. His charismatic style and his position as the *de facto* leader of the Qeerroo – together with active campaigning – have been key in cementing OFC's widespread support in areas where it was previously rather unknown.

The existence of sub-regional divisions and different Oromo branches – which, as we will see, often coincide with religion – is an important factor in the highly personalized Oromo politics. And this is something that requires careful balancing acts. An Oromo politician's primary base is always his or her home region, clan, and sometimes Oromo branch, and it is nearly impossible to build a political career without solidifying that base. The Oromo are similarly very conscious about any politician's origin and branch. Even for established figures like Dawud Ibsa and Merera Gudina – everyone is aware that the former is a Macha Oromo from Wollega and the latter a Tulama Oromo from West Shoa. The same is – to a certain degree – true for Kemal Gelchu background as an Arsi Oromo and for PM Abiy Ahmed's Jimma roots.

Sub-regional lines and branches also matters as part of internal conflicts within Oromo parties and movements. One example of this is the internal split within OLF between Dawud Ibsa and Kemal Gelchu in 2008. While this was mainly due to disagreement over politics and strategies, it is also clear that sub-regional and branch identities mattered.⁵³

It is against this backdrop that Jawar Mohammed's allegiance to OFC becomes important. With Merera Gudina from West Shoa and Bekele Gerba from Wollega, the party had established an important base in those areas, but remained rather weak beyond that. In addition to that, they are both Orthodox Christians, which also were true for all the members of the party's Central Committee. Merera Gudina is said to have been painfully aware of this fact, and had reportedly been searching to include Muslims into the leadership – to broaden the base.⁵⁴ One informant from Bale expressed such sentiments as follows:

If OFC wants to be an Oromo party it must represent all the 10 zones of Oromia. Most of the top leaders of OFC are come from the Tulama and Macha Oromo ... Only Addisu Bekele is from Guji, the rest are Tulama and Macha. There is no single person from Bale or Arsi or Harar. ... This is what our people told Jawar Mohammed when he visited Robe, Dello, Medda Welabu, Ginir and Ciro; 'where are our people?' ... We Oromo from Arsi and Hararghe have been suppressed from different directions, not only by the Amhara, but by the Christian Oromo too. We used to be oppressed by the Tulama and Macha for 27 years.⁵⁵

The role of religion

The Oromo is religiously heterogenous, and religious affiliation conflates to a large degree with sub-regional and clan identities. Updated numbers are hard to get, but the 2007 Census listed the population of Oromia as approximately 50% Muslim, 27% Orthodox Christian, 18% Protestant Christian, and 4% *Waqeffana* (traditional Oromo religion). The vast majority of Oromo Muslims are found in the eastern parts of the region, the majority of Orthodox Christians are found in Shoa, while Protestant Christians dominate Wollega, Guji, and Borana.

Religion and regional belonging remained an impediment for the Oromo struggle from its early days, seen by the composition of the earlier fronts. The OLF leadership was

dominated by Christians, while SALF was made up of Muslims from the east – which moreover coincided with the old dichotomy of highlander versus lowlander and contributed in this way to reinforce feelings of superiority or inferiority among the Oromo. A SALF veteran expressed this as follows:

The main reason why the Oromo movement was not successful was religion. The Christians and the Muslims opposed each other, this was the main case. The Muslim Oromo from the lowlands didn't understand that there were other non-Muslim Oromo ... There was strongest hate from the Christian side towards the Muslims. The Christian Oromo were affiliated with the government. They saw the Muslim Oromo as only Muslims, they didn't regard them as Oromo. They had no experience with a Muslim government, but was fearing that. The Muslims then hated the Christians in return. This was all exacerbated by politics; the Somali supported the Muslims and Haile Selassie supported the Christians.⁵⁶

When speaking about religious affiliation, it is important not to think of this as personal conviction or belief, but rather as a collective identity of belonging to a religious community. Abiy Ahmed's Pentecostalism and his explicit use of a semi-religious rhetoric might be an exception here, something that has created the perception that the cabinet and certainly his close advisers are dominated by Pentecostals and Protestant Christians. While informants agreed that none of the political parties had any particular religious policy, but adhered to the principle of secularism, PP tends to be viewed as a "Protestant party."⁵⁷ The same was true for OLF, because of its stronghold in Wollega, while OFC was perceived as more religiously balanced.⁵⁸ Reaching this balance has, as noted, been a deliberate strategy by the party leadership, particularly by bringing Jawar Mohammed onboard. The importance of religion was moreover noticeable during Haacaaluu Hundeessaa's funeral, when Muslim Oromo in Bale expressed surprise that he was buried in an Orthodox Church – saying, "We thought he was Oromo", reflecting their view that Orthodox Christianity is equated with the Amhara.⁵⁹

Jawar Mohammed's religious affiliation has, however, stirred both positive and negative reactions. On the one hand, he has broad-based support among the youth, regardless of religion, where it was said that "he has support because he is Jawar ... it is about being Oromo."⁶⁰ Moreover, Jawar has a particular support among the Muslims of eastern Oromia. As many traditionally have felt marginalized wherein "all public offices in Hararghe have been run by [Christian] Oromo from outside of Hararghe; from Shoa and Wollega,"⁶¹ the emergence of a national Muslim politician like Jawar Mohammed has been widely celebrated. One informant in Bale said that "OFC would be nothing here without Jawar ... people know about Merera and Bekele, but they are not of the people here – they are not Muslims, and they are not from the east."⁶² This was confirmed by a leading figure within OFC, saying that "Jawar has become the new Ahmed Gragn; the first Muslim leader to rise to the national level since Ahmed Gragn."⁶³ Another expressed this as follows:

People were saying that 'Jawar is our eye', demonstrating how close he is to the people. Also, they are saying; let us all die and let Jawar live and continue the struggle ... He is the first Muslim who has risen to this current level – and that means a lot to Muslims.⁶⁴

Jawar Mohammed's Muslim background has, on the other hand, gained increased attention among Christian non-Oromo since late 2019, where accusations of him being a "Muslim extremist" have been spreading. This was amplified by social media postings,

where he was compared with the late Abubakr al-Bagdadi of the Islamic State and it was claimed that he hailed from Yemen.⁶⁵ These accusations were widely mentioned among non-Oromo Christians during our fieldwork in January and February 2020, and even many foreign observers appeared to buy into this narrative.

While the picture of Jawar Mohammed as an “extremist” is clearly a fabrication, it has, however, gained traction among some Christian Oromo. One senior Oromo official from Wollega in one of Ethiopia’s largest Protestant church put it very clearly: “I don’t trust Jawar, he is a Muslim. There are interests behind him, from the Muslims, from the Arabs. Sure, he has contributed much to the changes, but I don’t trust him.”⁶⁶ This has generated efforts by Oromo Orthodox Christians; where in particular statements by the Oromo clergy-activist *Qes Belay Mekonnen* and Deacon Haile Mikael from Shoa have urged inter-religious peace and Oromo unity.

The intricate relations between religion and Oromo sub-branches affecting Oromo political cohesiveness is particularly noticeable in the eastern parts, especially in Arsi and Bale. The native population in these areas is the Arsi Oromo, but from the 1940s, there was a growing influx of Shoa Oromo from the north, seeking land and better livelihoods.⁶⁷ These were – in contrast to the Muslim, pastoralist Arsi Oromo – all agriculturalists and Orthodox Christians.⁶⁸ During the Bale Insurgency in the 1960s and continued Arsi Oromo resistance towards the state in the 1970s, the Shoa Oromo perceived this as religiously driven, i.e. as a Muslim uprising, and consequently sided with the state against the Arsi Oromo. This, in turn made them a target for the Arsi Oromo insurgents, causing bloody conflicts between the two groups.⁶⁹ During the transition in 1991, the first force to enter Bale was the OLF, which the Arsi Oromo immediately rallied around. As these OLF fighters were Muslims, the Shoa Oromo were hesitant to give OLF their support, and allied instead with the OPDO, which in turn meant that they in the decades that followed became the most loyal OPDO cadres and the ones populating the zonal and local administrations across the zone and region.⁷⁰ While this has changed over time, there is still a strong resentment among the Arsi Oromo – perceiving the Shoa Oromo as being on the “wrong side” of the historical Oromo struggle.⁷¹

There are no accurate numbers on the actual size of the Shoa Oromo population in Bale, but a previous estimate puts it at 10%.⁷² The number of Shoa Oromo in Arsi is assumed to be higher.⁷³ This implies they represent a relatively important political bloc in these areas. In contrast to Shoa as a region, there are good reason to believe that the support for PP is rather strong among the Shoa Oromo in Arsi and Bale. Much of this is due to the fact that the group is a religious minority in these areas. Memories of the conflictual past are very much alive, and there is continued distrust towards the Muslim Arsi Oromo. The latter’s support for OFC/Jawar Mohammed seems to have made the former cautious, where it also seems that they have bought-in to the narrative of him as a Muslim extremist. The PP with its Ethiopia-centric policies thus constitutes a “safe bet” for the Shoa Oromo, and Abiy is seen as one who could offer protection to the Shoa Oromo as a “minority” in these areas.

The role of the Oromo youth?

The tensions between support for the Oromo ethno-nationalist and the inherent divisions we have discussed here are most prominent among the senior and adult Oromo

population. This is, however, less prevalent among the Oromo youth, who have been the driving force for recent years' political change, indicating that the new generation is more able to transcend internal divisions. Traditionally, the Oromo social organization is based on different age-sets with different statuses and obligations towards communal roles, and the youth have been castigated for lack of adherence to established traditions and authorities. An elder in Robe complained, for example, that the young generation was only following activists [i.e. Jawar Mohammed] on social media, and lamented "What happens when the internet is cut, who would you listen to then?"⁷⁴ The phrase that was constantly repeated during conversations with adult informants was that the "youth were too emotional." Nobody, it was claimed, was even asking about the different parties' programs, and the high degree of polarization inhibited any form of nuance. Such "politics of emotions" were said to be "driven by a policy of fear and hate; fear of the other and hate of the other."⁷⁵ Jawar Mohammed was in similar terms said to be "too emotional" and going too far.⁷⁶

While initially enthusiastic, the Oromo youth have become the most explicit critics of Abiy Ahmed and the PP government – and the dominant sentiment has turned to disappointment and even a feeling of betrayal. This was mainly expressed through an ethno-nationalist rhetoric, condemning PP as a unitary party and fearing the return of the Amhara as the dominant group. The youth commonly referred to the new Unity Park in Addis Ababa as proofs of this, complaining about the park's pictures of Menelik and Haile Selassie. One informant lamented that: "there is only one Oda tree there – of plastic, and there is no mention of atrocities like Anole."⁷⁷

An underlying factor for the youth's critical position is the prevailing harsh socio-economic situation, and the discrepancy between this and the initially high expectations of change they had of Abiy Ahmed.⁷⁸ Lack of tangible socio-economic change has not only brought the youth back to a prevailing sense of marginalization, hopelessness, and despair, but frustrated expectations have furthermore exacerbated this situation, adding to and reinforcing their disappointment, discontent, and anger.⁷⁹ As one informant expressed it: "there has been no development, everything is like before."⁸⁰ With an estimated 59% of the population under 25, the youth represent a significant political power ready to be mobilized, in turn becoming a crucial group in future political development.⁸¹

Youth has in Africa become an increasingly fluid category, where demographic, cultural and socio-economic changes have led to the expansion of youth as an age-group, and also an alienated, marginalized, and disadvantaged group.⁸² Particularly important for this discussion is how disparate forces due to processes of modernization have dislocated them from their inherent past, causing disruptions from traditional social fabric and loss of social capital and indigenous skills, and leading to the detachment of youths from the cultural meaning of the symbols and practices of their seniors. These developments can in Ethiopia be traced back to the Derg period, constituting a significant socio-cultural rupture, with another shift occurring in 1991. Each of the succeeding regimes sought to shape the future in their own disparate ideological image, while, at the same time, discrediting that of the former ones. Modeled upon the notion of linear progress, the past was moreover labeled as "backward" and retrograde.⁸³

The Oromo youth were, meanwhile, exposed to an ethno-nationalist narrative that emphasized the past historic and cultural origins of the Oromo, and which also vested much into revitalizing and even reconstructing this.⁸⁴ Relevant examples of this is

establishment of the Oromo Abba Gadaa Council (*Gumii Abbooti Gadaa*) and the reconfiguration of the Irrecha ceremony.⁸⁵

While enthusiastic about this, the Oromo youth have a rather theoretical relationship to their cultural history and institutions.⁸⁶ This was confirmed by informants attached to the newly established Abba Gadaa of the Afran-Qallu, saying: “It will take time before the youth understand this and accept it ... but we give lectures about the *gadaa* system to the youth.”⁸⁷ Similarly important is how the Abba Gadaa and other traditional figures – due to belief that they were vested with a particular spiritual power – used to be respected, and even feared, which is no longer the case among the current young generation.

This is not to say that the Oromo ethno-nationalist narrative of cultural heritage has no relevance, and it is clear that it constitutes an important source of pride, an emotional resource, and a factor for political mobilization. The key point is, however, that the youth’s loosened ties with traditional cultural capital and indigenous skills have made it easier for them to transcend boundaries defined by religion, sub-regions, and parochial identities, something clearly seen in the widespread support for Jawar Mohammed. The fact that he is a Muslim and Arsi, seems not to matter much, as he enjoys similar support among Protestant youth in Wollega, Orthodox in Shoa, and Muslims in Hararghe.

This means, on the one hand, that the current young generation is better equipped to forge a pan-Oromo political cohesiveness, and as such, they have the potential to write a new chapter in the history of the Oromo struggle. On the other hand, the situation underpinned by socio-economic discontent and despair has generated a high degree of anger among the Oromo youth, thus making them a “wild card” and a very volatile dimension of current Oromo politics. While the youth has the potential to play a significant force for change – as seen in particular in the widespread protest movement from 2015 – this force could be a constructive or disruptive force. Much of this would hinge on how the various political leaders are able to communicate with and incorporate the youth in their political program.

Conclusion: fluctuating Oromo politics

The populous Oromo people and its vast socio-cultural heterogeneity are also of course reflected in the various political sentiments and streams held and supported by such a diverse constituency. Our argument in this article has been to show how the three main political positions – simplified as unitarist, federalist, and secessionist – may reflect historical trajectories and cultural sentiments among the Oromo. As such, we have tried to uncover the deeper anchoring behind the surface representation of Oromo politics.

Clearly, the heterogeneity of the Oromo socio-cultural nation also fragments its political landscape, which we see reflected in how Oromo political elites are projecting various elements of identity (geographical, clan, religious) in order to rally support for their stand and political parties. At the same time, these divisions may also be used to form alliances with non-Oromo political elites favoring the same political position, and thereby casting certain views as treacherous to the “Oromo first” discourse. The resurgence of the Oromo insurgency war in western Wollega, may be interpreted as an expression of such sentiments, and will possibly re-introduce the relevance of a secessionist discourse.

Our findings through interview data and observations have led us to believe that the unitarist political discourse projected by PP has rather little support among large segments

of the Oromo, and among the Oromo youth in particular. This was the impression from Hararghe in the east, in Bale further south, and in Shoa in the west, and it certainly also appears to be so in Wollega too. The dominant and repeated factor conveyed for not supporting PP was exactly the transition from the Oromo Democratic Party (ODP) to PP. The recurrent claim was that this was synonymous with abandoning the Oromo cause and people and that the PP had become an Ethiopianist party seeking to abolish the multinational federal model. Furthermore, many believed that PP's endgame is the return to a centralized system, which historically has meant Amhara dominance, leading to the obliteration of equality between the country's ethnic groups. One informant expressed this as follow:

We didn't support OPDO from the beginning. But, that party had the Oda tree – the sign of the Oromo – as its symbol. It had Oromo in its name. There is no Oromo mentioned in the name of PP, and it's not an Oromo party. They talk about an Oromia branch of the PP, but that is not real. The name of the party is registered as PP, and it cannot have different names in the different regions.⁸⁸

The outburst of violence and Oromo rights rhetoric in the aftermath of the killing of Haa-chaaluu Hundeessaa early July 2020, reminds us that the Oromo struggle is still a potent force to reckon with. It is also a manifestation of the deep political divisions within the Oromo community, as well as within the national Ethiopian political discourse. Oromo politics will likely continue to be defined by the three positions of unitarists, federalist, and secessionist – and their support and strength will vacillate in relation to political events on the ground. Historically, we have seen a correlation between a centralizing – and perceived subjugating – Ethiopian government and increasing support for a secessionist discourse. If Prosperity Party continues to advocate and enforce a centralizing policy, one may assume that the mainstream federalist discourse will be partly drowned by secessionist's demands.

Notes

1. See for example Lata, *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroad*; Jalata, ed., *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse*; Sorensen, *Imagining Ethiopia*; Hultin et al. eds., *Being and Becoming Oromo*.
2. Yates, *The Other Abyssinians*.
3. We are grateful to Muhammad Jemal from Medda Welabu University for collecting valuable data from Bale.
4. See Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia*.
5. Conversations with Leenco Lata during his exile in Norway.
6. Levine, *Greater Ethiopia*, 146.
7. Ibid., 84–5.
8. Megersa, "Oromumma"; Bulcha, "The Survival and Reconstruction of Oromo National Identity."
9. Hultin et al. eds., *Being and Becoming Oromo*, 9.
10. Jalata, *Oromummaa*, 12.
11. Bekele, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*, 68–9.
12. Østebø, *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*.
13. Brow, "Community, Hegemony, and the Uses of the Past," 3.
14. Tronvoll, "Ambiguous Elections."
15. Donham and James, eds., *The Southern marches of Imperial Ethiopia*.
16. Gnamo, *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire*.

17. Østebø, *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*; Tareke, *Power and Protest*.
18. Zoga, *Gezetena Gezot*; Hassan, "Review Essay."
19. On the establishment of EPRDF and the development of structures of governance and control in post-1991 Ethiopia, see Vaughan and Tronvoll, *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Life*, 115f.
20. A stampede occurred during the Irrecha ceremony on 2 October, 2016. According to government sources 55 people died, but other sources put the death toll much higher, possibly as many as 500.
21. Terje Østebø, "Analysis: The Role of the Qeerroo in Future Oromo Politics", *Addis Standard*, 26 May 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-the-role-of-the-qeerroo-in-future-oromo-politics/> (accessed 13 June 2020).
22. Kjetil Tronvoll (2019) "Opinion: Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again: The Restoration of EPRDF?" *Addis Standard*, 26 March 2020. <https://addisstandard.com/opinion-putting-humpty-dumpty-together-again-the-restoration-of-eprdf/> (accessed June 14 2020).
23. Forsén and Tronvoll, "Protest and Political Change in Ethiopia."
24. *The Economist*, "Ethiopians are Going Wild for Abiy Ahmed", 18 August 2018. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/08/18/ethiopians-are-going-wild-for-abi-ahmed> (accessed 2 March 2020).
25. The OLA formally broke from the OLF when they restarted the insurgency, likely in order to protect the OLF leadership and member base from being accused of destabilizing the state and becoming vulnerable for arrests.
26. The *Medemer* webpage; <https://medemer.et> (accessed 3 March 2020).
27. Linda Yohannes, "Abiy's Homespun Balancing Act: Medemer Reviewed", *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 January 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/01/26/abiys-homespun-balancing-act-medemer-reviewed/> (accessed 3 March 2020).
28. "Prosperity Party Bylaws", unofficial translation, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PP-bylaws-2.pdf> (accessed 3 March 2020).
29. Salem Solomon, "Efforts to End Ethiopia's Ruling Party Draw Criticism from Within", *VOA News*, 4 December 2019. <https://www.voanews.com/africa/efforts-end-ethiopias-ruling-party-draw-criticism-within> (accessed 28 March 2020).
30. After his public statement of disagreement on VOA, pressure was reportedly put to bear on Lemma Megersa and in a short statement in late 2019, it was declared that the two had reconciled their differences, without disclosing any substance of the talks. See Ezega, "Lemma Megersa Has Narrowed His Differences with Abiy Ahmed: Oromia Bureau", 23 December 2019. <https://www.ezega.com/News/NewsDetails/7584/Lemma-Megersa-Has-Narrowed-His-Differences-with-Abiy-Ahmed-Oromia-Bureau> (accessed 28 March 2020).
31. Repeated interviews with Jawar Mohammed in Addis Ababa, 2019-2020.
32. Woldemariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa*, 198.
33. Dawit Endeshaw, "Lemma Removes Oromia Security Chief", *The Reporter Ethiopia*, 3 April 2019. <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/article/lemma-removes-oromia-security-chief> (accessed 2 April 2020).
34. Article 8 *The Vision, Mission and Values of the Party*, sub-article 1.a. (Unofficial translation of Prosperity Party by-laws.) See also Prosperity Party Political Program, chapter 2 "To build a strong and accepted long-lasting government system".
35. Interview, Ambo, 14 February 2020.
36. See Ethiopia Insight for a review of the book *Medemer* outlining the way of thinking on Ethiopian unity: Linda Yohannes, "Abiy's Homespun Balancing act: Medemer Reviewed", *Ethiopia Insight*, 26 January 2020. <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2020/01/26/abiys-homespun-balancing-act-medemer-reviewed/> (accessed 28 March 2020).
37. Interview, Robe, 19 February 2020.
38. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.
39. "The Interview: 'We Think We Will Win a Majority in Oromia and Win Significant Seats in the Federal Parliament,' Dawud Ibsa", *Addis Standard*, 3 December 2019. <https://>

- addisstandard.com/the-interview-we-think-we-will-win-a-majority-in-oromia-and-win-significant-seats-in-the-federal-parliament-dawud-ibsa/ (accessed 28 March 2020).
40. Interview, Ambo, 16 February 2020.
 41. Interview, Robe, 15 February 2020.
 42. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.
 43. *Addis Standard*, "Interview: 'I Have Always Said That There is Really No Ideological Difference Between Oromo Political Parties' Jawar Mohammed", 31 December 2019. <https://addisstandard.com/interview-i-have-always-said-that-there-is-really-no-ideological-difference-between-oromo-political-parties-jawar-mohammed/> (accessed 2 March 2020).
 44. Tronvoll, *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia*.
 45. Signs of emerging internal fractions appeared in June 2020, when Kemal Galchu went public criticizing what he saw as the dominance of Jawar Mohammed.
 46. Jalata, *Oromummaa*, 146.
 47. Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 293; Østebø, *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*.
 48. Baxter, "Boran Age-Sets and Warfare"; Bartels, *Oromo religion*, 81, 85; Schlee and Shongolo, "Local war and its impact."
 49. Salviac, *An Ancient People in the State of Menelik*, 226.
 50. Interview, Ambo, 14 February 2020.
 51. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.
 52. Interview, Ambo, 14 February 2020.
 53. *Oromo Affairs*, "Kemal Gelchu & Co.: 'OLF' Trojan Horse? Part 1", 7 January 2012. <https://oromoaffairs.blogspot.com/2012/01/kemal-gelchu-co-olf-trojan-horse-part-i.html> (accessed 5 March 2020).
 54. Interview, Addis Ababa, 12 January 2020.
 55. Interview, Robe, 19 February 2020.
 56. Interview, Addis Ababa, 30 July 2011.
 57. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.
 58. Interview, Robe, 15 February 2020.
 59. Phone interview, 10 July 2020.
 60. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.
 61. Interview, Haramaya, 12 February 2020.
 62. Interview, Haramaya, 12 February 2020.
 63. Ahmed ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi was a military leader of the 16th century Sultanate of Adal, whose forces defeated the Ethiopian imperial army and fractured the Ethiopian state. Phone interview, 11 July 2020.
 64. Interview, Haramaya, 12 February 2020.
 65. *The Times of Axum*, "Radical Islamist Leader Denies Yemeni Ties", 17 September 2019. <https://timesofaxum.com/radical-islamist-leader-denies-yemeni-ties/> ; ECADF, "Jawar Mohammed is the Al-Baghdadi of Addis Not an Oromo Activist!", 24 November 2019. <https://ecadforum.com/2019/11/24/jawar-mohammed-is-the-al-baghdadi-of-addis-not-an-oromo-activist/> (accessed 19 March 2020).
 66. Interview, Addis Ababa, 17 February 2020.
 67. It needs to be added that Emperor Menelik gave Shoa Oromo land in Arsi at the end of the 19th century as a reward for their contributions during the Arsi campaign.
 68. Blackhurst, "A Community of Shoa Galla in Southern Ethiopia."
 69. Østebø, *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia*.
 70. Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 287f.
 71. *Sirna Araaraa Arsii Baalee fi Tuulama Baalee* [Reconciliation Decision among the Arsi of Bale and the Tulama of Bale], unpublished document, 11 November 2019.
 72. Østebø, *Localising Salafism*, 291.
 73. This is because migration to Arsi started earlier and was more extensive.
 74. Field-log, 17 January 2020.
 75. Interview, Haramaya, 12 February 2020.
 76. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020.

77. Interview, Dirre Dawa, 10 February 2020. The Oda tree refers to the sacred Sycamore tree and Anole is a place in Arsi – remembered as a site where Menelik's forces massacred a large number of Oromo in the late 19th century.
78. Abebe, "Lost futures?"
79. Di Nunzio, *The Act of Living*.
80. Interview, Ambo, 15 February 2020.
81. "The World Factbook", *Central Intelligence Agency*, 2020. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html> (accessed 24 March 2020).
82. Abbink, "Being Young in Africa," 7; Diouf, "Engaging Postcolonial Cultures," 2.
83. Donham, *Marxist Modern*; Østebø, "Being Young, Being Muslim in Bale."
84. See Ranger and Hobsbawm, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*.
85. See Serawit Bekele, *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*; *Finfinne Tribune*, "Founding Congress of the Oromo Abbaa Gadaa's Council (Gumii Abbooti Gadaa)", 9 October 2014. <http://gadaa.net/FinfinneTribune/2014/10/in-photos-founding-congress-of-the-oromo-abbaa-gadaas-council-gumii-abbooti-gadaa/> (accessed 23 March 2020).
86. See Baxter, "Towards a Comparative Ethnography of the Oromo," 179.
87. Interview, Harar, 12 February 2020.
88. Interview, Ambo, 14 February 2020.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Bibliography

- Abbink, Jon. "Being Young in Africa: The Politics of Despair and Renewal." In *Vanguards or Vandals: Youth, Politics and Conflict in Africa*, edited by Jon Abbink, 1–33. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Abebe, Tatek. "Lost Futures? Educated Youth Precarity and Protests in the Oromia Region." *Children's Geographies* 10, no. 1018 (2020): 1–17.
- Bartels, Lambert. *Oromo Religion*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1983.
- Baxter, Paul. "Boran Age-Sets and Warfare." In *Warfare Among East African Herders*, edited by Katsuyoshi Fukui, and David Turton, 69–95. Osaka: Senri Ethnological Studies, 1977.
- Baxter, Paul. "Towards a Comparative Ethnography of the Oromo, The Importance of Affines." In *Being and Becoming Oromo*, edited by Paul Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi, 178–189. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996.
- Baxter, Paul, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi. "Introduction." In *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*, edited by Paul Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi, 7–25. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996.
- Bekele, Serawit. *Locating Politics in Ethiopia's Irreecha Ritual*. Leiden: Brill, 2019.
- Blackhurst, Hector. "A Community of Shoa Galla in Southern Ethiopia." Ph.D.-thesis, University of Manchester, 1974.
- Blackhurst, Hector. "Ethnicity in Southern Ethiopia: The General and the Particular." *Africa* 50, no. 1 (1980): 55–65.
- Brow, James. "Community, Hegemony, and the Uses of the Past." *Anthropological Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (1990): 1–6.
- Bulcha, Mekuria. "The Survival and Reconstruction of Oromo National Identity." In *Being and Becoming Oromo*, edited by P.T.W. Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi, 48–66. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996.
- Di Nunzio, Marco. *The Act of Living: Street Life, Marginality, and Development in Urban Ethiopia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019.
- Diouf, Mamadou. "Engaging Postcolonial Cultures: African Youth and Public Space." *African Studies Review* 46, no. 2 (2003): 1–12.

- Donham, Donald and Wendy James, eds. *The Southern Marches of Imperial Ethiopia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Donham, Donald. *Marxist Modern*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Forsén, Thea, and Kjetil Tronvoll. "Protest and Political Change in Ethiopia: The Success of the Oromo Qeerroo Yout Movement." *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 2020.
- Gnamo, Abbas H. *Conquest and Resistance in the Ethiopian Empire, 1880-1974: The Case of the Arsi Oromo*. Leiden: Brill, 2014.
- Hassan, Mohammed. "Review Essay: Gezetena Gezot, Macha Tulama Self-Help Association, by Olana Zoga." *Journal of Oromo Studies* 4, no. 1-2 (1997): 203–238.
- Hultin, Jan, Alessandro Triulzi, and Paul Baxter, eds. *Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996.
- Jalata, Asafa, ed. *Oromo Nationalism and the Ethiopian Discourse*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1998.
- Jalata, Asafa. *Oromummaa: Oromo Culture, Identity and Nationalism*. Atlanta: Oromia Publishing Company, 2007.
- Lata, Leenco. *The Ethiopian State at the Crossroad: Decolonization & Democratization or Disintegration*. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1999.
- Levine, Donald. *Greater Ethiopia; The Evolution of a Multiethnic Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Megersa, Gemechu. "Oromumma: Tradition, Consciousness and Identity." In *Being and Becoming Oromo*, edited by Paul Baxter, Jan Hultin, and Alessandro Triulzi, 92–102. Lawrenceville: Red Sea Press, 1996.
- Østebø, Terje. "Being Young, Being Muslim in Bale." In *Muslim Ethiopia: The Christian Legacy, Identity Politics, and Islamic Reformism*, edited by Patrick Desplat, and Terje Østebø, 47–69. New York: Palgrave, 2013.
- Østebø, Terje. *Islam, Ethnicity, and Conflict in Ethiopia: The Bale Insurgency (1963-1970)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Østebø, Terje. *Localising Salafism: Religious Change among Oromo Muslims in Bale, Ethiopia*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
- Ranger, Terence and Eric Hobsbawm, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Salviac, Martial de. *An Ancient People in the State of Menelik: The Oromo*. Translated by Ayalew Kanno. Addis Ababa: Oromia Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2005 [1901].
- Schlee, Günther, and Abdullahi A. Shongolo. "Local War and its Impact on Ethnic and Religious Identification in Southern Ethiopia." *Geojournal* 36, no. 1 (1995): 7–17.
- Sorensen, John. *Imagining Ethiopia: Struggles for History and Identity in the Horn of Africa*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993.
- Tareke, Gebru. *Power and Protest: Peasant Revolts in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Tronvoll, Kjetil. "Ambiguous Elections: The Influence of Non-Electoral Politics in Ethiopian Democratisation." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47, no. 3 (2009a): 449–474.
- Tronvoll, Kjetil. *War and the Politics of Identity in Ethiopia: The Making of Enemies and Allies in the Horn of Africa*. Rochester: James Currey, 2009b.
- Vaughan, Sarah, and Kjetil Tronvoll. *The Culture of Power in Contemporary Ethiopian Life*. Stockholm: Sida Studies, 2003.
- Woldemariam, Michael. *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and Discontent*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.
- Yates, Brian. *The Other Abyssinians: The Northern Oromo and the Creation of Modern Ethiopia, 1855-1913*. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020.
- Zoga, Olana. *Gezetena Gezot: Macha Tulama Merdadja Mahaber* [in Amharic: Restraint and Suppression: The Macha Tulama Self-help Association]. Addis Ababa: n.s., 1985.